

La buena fama durmiendo (good reputation sleeping) –
Manuel Alvarez Bravo 1939



“La buena fama durmiendo”; Manuel Alvarez Bravo 1939

Introduction

This picture was made by Bravo at the request of Andre Breton, who was visiting Bravo's home town of Mexico City. Breton needed a cover photograph for the catalogue of the Surrealist exhibition he was mounting there and considered Bravo to be a consummate 'Surrealist Photographer'. Bravo understood that there was some urgency to the request so set about assembling the elements of the photograph right away. Alicia, one of the art school models agreed to pose for him, his friend Doctor Marin did the bandaging and the blanket and spiny fruits arrived courtesy of the school caretaker.

On the academy roof, the setting for the photograph, Bravo explains, "The doctor arrived. He bandaged the woman and I took a photograph. I worked very suddenly and very rapidly, obeying a sense of surrealist automatism" (Valle, 1938)

Although the mechanics of the photography were hurried, Bravo brought his long-accrued inventiveness and originality to the work. It is a picture which invites close study and stimulates a lively exchange with the viewer; why is she naked? Why is she bandaged? What do the prickly fruits signify? Can we gain some insight (or inference) from the title, *Good Reputation Sleeping*?

The fruits may be employed as a visual contrast to the figure, being difficult and possibly painful to enjoy, whereas the woman appears vulnerable and defenceless. Her *reputation* might appear to be at serious risk. But at the same time she is *sleeping*... is she convinced of her security, to the extent that she feels safely *asleep*... do the fruits protect her in some way? This picture is ripe for multiple allegorical interpretations.

Irrespective of Bravo's intent (what little is known of it) some consideration must be given to the nature of the relationship between the picture and various different viewers, along with an examination of the actual contents of the picture. The overall feel of *buena fama* is one of uncertainty and confusion. The elements are simple and familiar but their coexistence in a staged setting prompts the viewer to attempt a rationalisation or interpretation; the former quickly proves irresolvable, the latter a course with multiple possibilities. In Barthes terms the *punctum* will, for most observers, be the spiny fruits, the points within the frame, leaving as the *studium* the general impression of ambiguity surrounding the depiction of an essentially naked woman.

The relationship between a viewer and a representation of a naked person is multi-faceted. There are stringently observed conventions in most societies concerning the circumstances under which it is acceptable to be *seen* naked. Mainly, we keep our clothes on. *Being* naked attracts very little comment; it's the exposure to gaze which exercises most cultures.

Where this relationship exists - between the naked and the observer - a transaction is established which revolves around the circumstances of the picture's origin and those of the observer, the viewer, at the point of viewing. Mulvey makes reference to this in her Freudian psychoanalytical examination of the gaze:

"Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" [Mulvey 1975]

The conjunction of the terms 'curious' and 'controlling' makes for uncomfortable reading when it infers that they generally coexist; but in this case the control is total and unavoidable since the subject can exert no influence in the present over the nature of the transaction. This may be considered a *voyeuristic* gaze - although the meaning of the term as appropriated for use in the sphere of visual analysis is fundamentally different to that of its origins in psychology where several other aspects are considered intrinsic to the voyeuristic experience.

The elements of the photograph - the partially naked figure, bandages and fruits - may elicit a viewer response which varies according to gender, age, ethnic origin, political alignment to mention just a few factors. For many though, the defining attribute of the photograph is that it shows a naked

woman. This may be perceived as exploitative - perhaps the model is forced by her straightened circumstances to display her body in this way, thus demeaning her. One might respond that we know nothing of her circumstances, nor of the exchange which led to her agreement to pose, but this may be counter-argued, in that it is not necessary for a victim to feel victimised. If the interaction is fundamentally abusive she cannot consent.

An alternative view is that like Occam's Razor, things are pretty much as they seem. An artist made a photograph of a model as an illustration for a catalogue. Bravo, the artist, was employed by his institution to teach and some of the instruction involved making images of a nude model. Viewers may dissect the subtext according to preference. However more issues arise when this work is considered in the wider context of the representation of the human body in art.

Kenneth Clarke in his book "The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form" claims that:

"no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow—and if it does not do so it is bad art and false morals."
[Clarke 1956]

Here Clarke addresses the mechanics of the gaze from the perspective of a Western European male in his fifties, writing in 1955. His views differ from those of his predecessors just as they appear rather patriarchal in a contemporary context.

Conclusion

To summarise, it seems reasonable to accept that there are a range of opinions on the relationships which may exist between the viewer and the viewed. The fundamental premise of each of these opinions will vary according to the viewer.

References:

Clark, Kenneth. *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. Bollingen Series 35.2. New York: Pantheon Books, 1956.

Mulvey, Laura: Screen, vol. 16, (Autumn 1975), pp 6-18 from Luxonline.org.uk. (2018). Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema - Laura Mulvey - Print version - Luxonline. [online] Available at:

http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema%28printversion%29.html [Accessed 2 Jan. 2018].

Valle, Rafael Heliodoro "Dialogo con Andre Breton" *Universidad* no 29, June 1938